THE ILLUMINATION OF THE GREEK MANUSCRIPT OF THE AKATHISTOS HYMN

(MOSCOW, STATE HISTORICAL MUSEUM, $SYNODAL\ GR.\ 429$)

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HE manuscript of the Akathistos Hymn, now in the State Historical Museum in Moscow, was brought to Russia from Mt. Athos in 1662. A gift to Czar Aleksej Mixajlovič, it was presented by the epitropoi of the church of the Virgin "of the Source of Gold" (Chrysopêgê) at Galata, to which it had been donated by Alexios Komnenos.¹ The codex has been mentioned on numerous occasions in Russian scholarly works. Since its miniatures were published as early as 1862,² non-Russian scholars, too, were able to include it in general works on Byzantine art. However, opinions have varied as to the date of the execution of these miniatures.

The Introduction to the photographic edition of the miniatures gives the following survey of previous opinions concerning the date of the manuscript: "In his catalog of Greek manuscripts of the Moscow Synodal Library, Professor Matthaei dated the manuscript to the tenth century, without substantiation. Archimandrite Savva adopted this view in his Catalog of the Greek manuscripts of the same library....Professor Wagen of Berlin, who had studied the manuscript in 1861, dated it to the eleventh century and based his opinion on the style of the miniatures. Finally, in his Historical Survey of Composers and Chants in the Greek Orthodox Church, Archbishop Filaret attributed it to the fourteenth century." According to the author of the Introduction, "the majority of scholars tend to agree with the latter opinion."

Archimandrite Amfiloxij⁴ assigned the manuscript's script to the fourteenth century. Since earlier scholars were not sure whether the manuscript was the work of one or of several hands, he provided tables showing the script from various sections of the codex; he also analyzed samples of letters from the text. In spite of this evidence, N. P. Kondakov in 1886 considered the miniatures to have been executed in the thirteenth century and found them similar to the Italian painting of that period.⁵ However, thirty years later he dated the manuscript to the second half of the fourteenth century,⁶ and N. V. Pokrovskij was inclined to share this opinion.⁷

J. Strzygowski, writing in 1906,8 pointed to similarities between the *Akathistos* miniatures and many frescoes on Mt. Athos and detected traces of the Syrian tradition in the rendering of certain subjects. He dated the manuscript

¹ Arxim. Vladimir, Sistematičeskoe opisanie rukopisej Moskovskoj Sinodal'noj (Patriaršej) biblioteki. I, Rukopisi grečeskie (Moscow, 1894), 417.

² Fotografičeskie snimki s miniatjur grečeskix rukopisej, naxodjaščixsja v Moskovskoj Sinodal'noj (b. Patriaršej) biblioteke, I (Moscow, 1862).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Arxim. Amfiloxij, O grečeskom licevom Akafiste Božiej Materi vtoroj poloviny XIV veka Moskovskoj Sinodal'noj biblioteki No. 429. Paleografičeskoe opisanie grečeskiz rukopisej XIII i XIV veka, III (Moscow, 1880), 118–33.

⁵ N. Kondakov, Histoire de l'art byzantin considéré principalement dans les miniatures (Paris, 1886), 127-28.

⁶ N. P. Kondakov, Ikonografija Bogomateri, III (St. Petersburg, 1915), 387.

⁷ N. V. Pokrovskij, Evangelie v pamjatnikax ikonografii (St. Petersburg, 1892), p. L.

⁸ J. Strzygowski, Die Miniaturen des Serbischen Psalters (Vienna, 1906), 129-33.

to the thirteenth century. In the same year, N. P. Lixačev⁹ published eight of the miniatures and expressed the view that a date in the fourteenth, or even in the fifteenth century was possible. O. Dalton¹⁰ noted the iconographic similarity of the Akathistos cycle to the frescoes of the Pantanassa at Mistra and to later ones on Mt. Athos, but dated the Moscow manuscript to the eleventh century. D. V. Ajnalov¹¹ analyzed in detail the manuscript's makeup and pointed out similarities between the frames of the miniatures, on the one hand, and the initials and decoration of fourteenth-century Gothic manuscripts on the other. He attempted to demonstrate that the work in question could be attributed to the imperial scriptorium of the Palaeologi and was related to the mosaics of the Kariye Camii. O. Wulff¹² thought that our cycle of miniatures was executed in the eleventh or twelfth century and that it was based on an even earlier model. J. Tikkanen¹³ analyzed the use of colors in the manuscript and attributed it to the late Palaeologan period. He noted in the illuminations an attempt to render true perspective in architecture and to give expression to feelings. V. N. Lazarev14 argued that the Akathistos was executed in the second half of the fifteenth century at the earliest, because, in his opinion, the manuscript's illuminations are characterized by a dry, linear manner. In spite of this dating, Lazarev related our manuscript to several Greek codices of the fourteenth century, such as the Typikon of the year 1346 (Athous Vatopedi 945) and the Commentary on the Book of Job of the year 1368 (Parisinus Gr. 135). Like Ajnalov, Lazarev postulated Western influence in the manuscript, which he found especially evident in its ornate initials. M. V. Ščepkina¹⁵ dated the manuscript to the end of the fourteenth century or the beginning of the fifteenth and assumed that its initials were added later. She based this assumption on the observation that the initials extend beyond the text into the margin, and sometimes into the miniature above; from this she concluded that no space was allotted for these initials when the codex was written. Thus, scholarly opinion as to the date of the manuscript has ranged between the tenth and the fifteenth centuries, although the majority of scholars have been inclined to place its execution around the year 1400.

The Akathistos Hymn consists of twenty-four strophes: twelve short ones (kontakia) and twelve long ones (oikoi). All the sections of the Hymn were illuminated, so that originally the manuscript contained twenty-four miniatures, of which now only twenty-three are left. The twelfth oikos has no miniature. "It is apparent that this once stood on the verso of the folio preceding that oikos, but this folio was cut out in the sixteenth or seventeenth century,

⁹ N. P. Lixačev, Materialy dlja istorii russkogo ikonopisanija (St. Petersburg, 1906), Nos. 700-707.

O. Dalton, Byzantine Art and Archaeology (Oxford, 1911), 481.
 D. V. Ajnalov, Vizantijskaja živopis' XIV stoletija (St. Petersburg, 1917), 106-13.

¹² O. Wulff, Die byzantinische Kunst (Berlin, 1924), 537.

¹⁸ J. J. Tikkanen, Studien ueber die Farbengebung in der mittelalterlichen Buchmalerei (Helsingfors, 1933), 205–206.

¹⁴ V. N. Lazarev, Istorija vizantijskoj živopisi (Moscow, 1947), 230, 369; idem, Feofan Grek i ego škola (Moscow, 1961), 28.

¹⁵ M. V. Ščepkina, Bolgarskaja miniatjura XIV stoletija. Issledovanie Psaltiri Tomič (Moscow, 1963), 147–48.

and the twelfth *kontakion*, which occupied that folio's recto, was transferred to the preceding folio and written in small characters."¹⁶

Sixteen of the surviving illuminations depict the life of the Virgin, beginning with the Annunciation and ending with the Presentation; in these compositions the artist closely relied upon iconographic models existing in his time. The other seven miniatures of the manuscript refer to the second part of the Akathistos—the doxologies of the Virgin. It seems that a fixed iconography of these themes did not exist in the Orthodox art of the Middle Ages. However, the problem cannot be definitely solved, since only a few manuscripts of the Akathistos have come down to us.

M. V. Ščepkina¹⁷ lists only five such manuscripts, three Slavic and two Greek. The Slavic codices are the Bulgarian Akathistos in the Tomič Psalter (Moscow, State Historical Museum, Muz. 2752, middle of the fourteenth century), the Serbian one in the Serbian Psalter of Munich (Munich, Staatsbibliothek, Cod. Slav. 4, late fourteenth century), and another Serbian Akathistos attached to the Belgrade Psalter of the beginning of the seventeenth century (this manuscript was destroyed during the Second World War). The first of the Greek manuscripts mentioned by Ščepkina dates from the sixteenth century; its present location is unknown. The second is our manuscript, Synodal Gr. 429. In her article on Parisinus Gr. 135, T. Velmans¹⁸ mentions in passing two fourteenth-century Akathistoi, one from Leningrad, another from the Escorial, which, in her opinion, were executed in Italy for a Greek patron. However, as there is no such manuscript in Leningrad, possibly Mme Velmans had our Akathistos in mind.

The seven miniatures of Synodal Gr. 429 containing the doxologies of the Virgin display a fairly uniform iconographical pattern; the artist depicts the Virgin frontally, either standing or enthroned. The series ends with a miniature of Christ seated on a throne. More diversified in their compositional treatment of these same subjects are the miniatures of the Akathistos of the Serbian Psalter in Munich and the Bulgarian Tomič Psalter in Moscow. I shall illustrate this point by two examples. On folio 219v of the Munich Psalter, which refers to the tenth kontakion,19 Christ is depicted sitting against a rocky background. To His right is the figure of the Cosmos, holding a white cloth in his hand; this is the usual representation of the Cosmos in the scene depicting the descent of the Holy Ghost on the Apostles. Three angels stand behind the Cosmos. The Virgin is to the left of Christ; three male figures stand behind her, and above them hovers an angel. In the Akathistos of the Tomič Psalter. on folio 292v20 the same subject is treated in an equally complex manner. Christ is depicted seated, in a blue mandorla from which blue rays emanate; He is turned toward the Virgin, who bows before Him. A multitude of people kneels at His left. In the background is a mountain, and standing to the right and left of it are two groups of angels. Below is the Cosmos in royal attire,

¹⁶ Fotografičeskie snimki, 9–10.

¹⁷ Ščepkina, loc. cit.

¹⁸ Tania Velmans, "Le Parisinus grecus 135 et quelques autres peintures de style gothique dans les manuscrits grecs à l'époque des Paléologues," Cahiers Archéologiques, 17 (1967), 235.

¹⁹ Strzygowski, op. cit., Pl. xvi.

²⁰ Ščepkina, op. cit., Pl. Lx, p. 81.

holding a white cloth. This illumination is iconographically similar to the miniature of the Munich Psalter. In the miniature on folio 25^v of Synodal Gr. 429 representing this very subject, Christ, in a mandorla, is surrounded by six angels and Cherubim. Thus, compared with the Tomič and Munich Psalters, the composition is simplified and the number of figures reduced.

The miniatures of the Synodal manuscript are placed either at the foot or, more often, at the head of the columns of the text. All of them are framed. The parchment inside the frame is entirely covered with colors and gold, as in the case of panel painting. The relation between text and illumination in our manuscript is just as close as it is in Byzantine manuscripts with unframed miniatures. The large number of miniatures in Synodal Gr. 429 and their appearance at frequent intervals is due to the fact that the artist illustrated short, specific portions of the text—the kontakia and the oikoi. To be sure, their frames separate the miniatures from the text; their function, as well as that of the gold background, is to give the illuminations added significance. However, it is the frames that determine the width of the miniatures, which equals or slightly exceeds the width of the text column. Because of this, text and illumination are perceived as a unified whole.

The composition of all the miniatures is marked by clarity and austerity, due to the use of axial symmetry. The emphasis on the center point is achieved in several ways. In those instances when the miniature includes two figures, the artist moves them toward the edges, leaving the center free. This technique of weighting the sides rather than the center is the most frequent device used in the manuscript (cf., e.g., the miniature of the first oikos, fol. 2^r). However, the two elements are not always of equal size. By enlarging one of them, the center of gravity is shifted slightly to one side; as a result, the composition is endowed with a certain tension and dynamic force (for example, the miniature for the sixth oikos, fol. 15v). Compositions consisting of a single figure are less frequent in the manuscript. When they appear, the artist always places the figure in the center; architectural details fill the lateral areas, and space is left between them and the central figure. The composition of the Visitation (oikos 3, fol. 7r; see fig. 1) reflects this same principle. In this miniature the central element is constituted by the two embracing figures of the Virgin and Elizabeth. Two high towers on either side frame the composition and a slight shift from center to left imparts a sense of movement to the picture. The structure of the multifigureed scenes is naturally more complex and varied. In the miniature of the Adoration of the Shepherds (oikos 5, fol. 13^r; see fig. 2), the Virgin with the Child, seated against the dark backdrop of the cave, constitutes the focal point. Three figures bowed in adoration stand to the left against a background of architectural structures, while the corresponding right side is left free.

Architectural elements play an important role in the composition of the miniatures. For instance, in the miniature illustrating kontakion 2 (folio 3^v), the movement of the Archangel Gabriel bearing the happy tidings to the Virgin is continued by the wall rising toward the turret that stands behind Mary. The artist uses architectural details or elements of landscape to give

visual emphasis to certain figures and enhance their expressiveness. In the miniatures to oikos 4 (fol. 10^r) and oikos 5 (fol. 13^r; see fig. 2), the cave behind the Virgin frames her figure and constitutes a kind of mandorla. In the miniature to oikos 8 (fol. 21^r), Christ is seated on a throne and behind him is a wall joining two pavilions, which delimit the composition left and right. The elements constituting the architectural structures are themselves complex. Usually these structures are presented on several planes and create an impression of three-dimensionality. In rendering their upper parts, the artist chooses an elevated viewpoint, thus emphasizing their depth. The lower parts of the buildings are cut off, as it were, by a straight line; in front of it is a strip of ground upon which the action takes place.

All the miniatures manifest the artist's interest in rendering emotions, especially through the use of gestures and movements; typical is the extended thumb, a gesture indicating surprise. The side glance gives expression to the faces. In depicting the scene of the Presentation (kontakion 7, fol. 17v), the artist is particularly successful in representing the relationship between the figures. The infant Jesus, whom Simeon is holding in his arms, is reaching out to his Mother but is looking at Simeon with his head turned toward the latter. Simeon's sideward glance, in turn, is directed toward the infant.

Along with the depiction of emotions and the dynamic force of their composition, the miniatures of our manuscript are drawn in a somewhat careless, though in its own way expressive, manner. The proportions of the figures are far removed from classical models. The lower parts of the bodies are shortened. The bent knees impart to the figures an impression of instability, which is further emphasized by the drapery. The facial types with their small, round, close-set eyes and short noses are also distinctive and bear a resemblance to those of the Akathistos of the Serbian Psalter in Munich. Sometimes the artist achieves facial expression through the use of asymmetry. Thus, in the miniature to oikos 9 (folio 23°), showing the Virgin before the astonished and speechless orators, ἡήτορος πολυφθόγγους ὡς ἰχθύας ἀφώνους, her cheeks are not of equal size and her eyes are on two different levels. Often the artist represents wrinkles on faces by means of little white lines and attempts to render the three-dimensionality of bare parts of the body by highlighting the projecting areas and shading the receding ones.

The chromatic scale of the miniatures is characterized by the extensive use of gold, applied as a background and serving also as a base for colors covering relatively small areas of the whole. The gold of the background is echoed by the gold of the initials and of the first lines of text below the miniatures. The green of the trees and the ground and the blue of the costumes are pale and somewhat dull, but the palette is brightened by the use of strokes and dabs of red. On the whole, the coloring of the miniatures lacks refinement and reveals also the same strong expressiveness which we encountered in discussing their drawing and composition. On the other hand, the wide range of colors and the use of gold to cover large areas distinguishes our *Akathistos* from fifteenth-century Greek manuscripts.

The color scheme of the miniatures permits us to date them in the second half of the fourteenth century. Their compositional devices do not contradict this dating. The use of architectural detail and the role of movement in unifying the compositional elements are likewise typical of the fourteenth century; so is the expressiveness of the figures and of their gestures and glances. Emphasis on modelling in chiaroscuro also suggests that the manuscript was produced in the late Palaeologan period. The use of subtle plastic modelling is not apparent in all the illuminations. Its hesitant and inconsistent use is again an indication that the pictures were executed before the fifteenth century, when its use became more prevalent.

The miniatures of the Commentary on the Book of Job in the Paris. Gr. 135 (dated to 1368)²¹ provide a close parallel to those of our Akathistos. They manifest the same expressiveness, the same gift for observation; their draughtsmanship, too, is mediocre, though expressive and not altogether devoid of skill. Interest in gestures, the use of asymmetry in depicting faces, which are far removed from the classical concept of beauty, and the dull colors are similar in the two codices. Architectural decoration and landscapes play a prominent role in the structure of the miniatures of the Commentary on the Book of Job. The absence of frames and of colored backgrounds, and the fact that these miniatures are on paper, not on vellum, introduce a distinction between the Paris and the Moscow manuscripts. The differentiation, however, is far less pronounced than it appears at first glance.

No less interesting than the miniatures are the initials in our codex. As we have seen, M. V. Ščepkina considers them to have been executed later than the illustrations, basing her conclusion on the fact that some of them overlap the illustrations or extend into the margins.²² However, the use of identical colors in initials and miniatures, the rendering of volume by the gradual highlighting of projecting areas, and the fringes appearing both in the frames enclosing the illustrations and in the initials indicate that the latter were executed at the same time as the miniatures. It would seem that allowance of adequate space for the initials was overlooked by the artists of both miniatures and initials—a negligence which is characteristic of the period.

The manuscript contains many initials. After the first kontakion, the initials of the strophes occur in alphabetical order, with the result that all the letters of the Greek alphabet appear in the codex.²³ These initials represent animals with elongated bodies. Volume is achieved by chiaroscuro modelling. The animals and birds do not coil around a central shaft but form the letters by the curves of their bodies (fol. 13^r, see fig. 2; fol. 20^v, see fig. 3). One of the most common methods of shaping a letter is to depict an animal emerging from the mouth of another; by their intertwining they fashion the letter. In folio 9^r, for example, we find represented a bird with a long tail from whose beak issues a coiled serpent, who in turn holds in its mouth another bird. The artist almost refuses to introduce abstract geometric patterns into the initials, except for certain short bases, from which emerge small figures of animals and

birds (fol. 1^r). Ordinarily, the extended paw of an animal (E on fol. 7^v) or its profile head (T on fol. 1^r) forms the necessary horizontal strokes of the letter. Sometimes, an almost naturalistic rendering of vegetable forms complements the animal figures. A branch with pointed leaves is seen originating from the jaws of an animal and winding in fantastic convolutions (on fol. 7^v). Occasionally, a two-headed eagle, the motif of the Palaeologan coat of arms, is represented (fols. 1^r and 28^v).

The use of chiaroscuro to convey the impression of volume has no parallel, to my knowledge, among initials in other fourteenth-century Byzantine manuscripts. However, a similar three-dimensionality in the representation of animals occurs in miniatures of *Paris*. *Gr*. 135, of the year 1368. A variety of fantastic as well as perfectly naturalistic animals is depicted throughout the 198 miniatures of this codex. Birds perched in trees and a rabbit in the grass appear even in the Anastasis (fol. 105^r).

The zoomorphic aspect of the Akathistos initials is not unusual in Byzantine art. Similar initials in the form of animals are found as early as the mideleventh century in the Homilies of John Chrysostom in Vindobonensis Theol. Gr. 63. Here, we also find the illusion of volume, although the artist of the eleventh-century codex achieves this effect by the use of strokes rather than by the light-and-shade modeling employed by the fourteenth-century artist.

Miss Ščepkina is correct in pointing out that the initials of the Akathistos are similar to those of the fourteenth-century manuscript of the Homilies of Gregory of Nazianz, in Moscow, State Historical Museum, Gr. 66.24 Admittedly, the initials in the latter are less stylized and their outlines are more sharply defined, since the gold background and the fringes are lacking. Moreover, the animals in this Gregory codex are simply intertwined, instead of emerging from the mouths of other animals, as we find in the codex of the Akathistos, and the illusion of three-dimensionality is conveyed merely by varying the thickness of the black contour lines.

The initials of the Akathistos in the State Historical Museum codex have particular importance in regard to four Old Russian manuscripts of the end of the fourteenth and the beginning of the fifteenth century. V. N. Lazarev, in his book on the art of Theophanes the Greek, suggested that the style of ornament in the Gospel of Koška (Lenin State Library, M 8657) has its origin in Theophanes' workshop.²⁵ The Gospel of Koška, along with three other Moscow manuscripts dating from the end of the fourteenth and the beginning of the fifteenth century—the Xitrovo Gospel (Lenin State Library, M 8654), the Andronik Gospel (State Historical Museum, Eparx. 436), and the Morozov Gospel (Armory of the Kremlin, No. 11956)²⁶—belong to a unique group of Old Russian manuscripts. Whereas the teratological style characterized by flat strap interlaces and the strongly stylized representation of animals²⁷ was prevalent in Russian manuscript of the latter part of the

²⁷ Lazarev, Feotan Grek, 69-75.

²⁶ T. B. Uxova and L. V. Pisarskaja, *Licevaja rukopis' Uspenskogo sobora* (Leningrad, 1969).

fourteenth and the beginning of the fifteenth century, in the modeling of the initials of the four codices I have just mentioned an obvious attempt toward three-dimensionality can be observed.

Certain features in the decoration of these codices, such as the motifs used in the headpieces, the form of the hastae of the initials, and the way structures are represented in the miniatures, point to a Byzantine origin and, according to Lazarev, reveal a familiarity with the "best examples of the art of fourteenthcentury Constantinople."28 The three-dimensional representation of animals, however, led this scholar to the conclusion that the initials of the Koška Gospel were influenced by Gothic models. In his opinion, only Theophanes, who had undoubtedly seen Western manuscripts in Galata and Kaffa, could ever have achieved a new and organic synthesis of Western and Russian elements.²⁹ But the analogy which Lazarev found with Gothic manuscript ornament is not very convincing. It would be justified only if nothing similar to the initials in these Russian Gospel books existed in contemporary manuscripts of Eastern Europe—and this is not the case. Besides, in the headpieces, initials, and marginalia of West European codices of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (above all in the Franco-Flemish manuscripts, which in turn influenced the English and German ones) the fantastic animals are never represented as emerging from another animal's mouth. Granted, we find in them, as in the Koška Gospel and the three manuscripts related to it, an attempt to modeling animal figures. There is, however, a definite difference between the two classes of manuscripts: in the West European ones the figures of animals, birds, acrobats, and jugglers (the so-called droleries) supplement the basic outlines of the letters, whereas in the four Russian manuscripts they constitute the very structure of the letters themselves.

T. I. Protas'eva, who devoted a study to the Morozov Gospel, claimed that the models for its initials were Byzantine, not Western,30 citing as proof the animal initials found in Byzantine manuscripts of the eleventh to thirteenth centuries. Actually, in view of the increased contacts between Byzantium and Russia in the last quarter of the fourteenth century and in the course of the fifteenth, Russian illuminators could have become acquainted not only with the earlier Byzantine manuscripts, but also with those of their own time. In my opinion, the modeling techniques used in the initials of the four Russian Gospels did not result from Theophanes the Greek's familiarity with remote Gothic manuscripts, but from his first-hand knowledge of Byzantine works, large numbers of which were imported to Russia at that time. The Akathistos of the State Historical Museum is one of several Byzantine manuscripts to have exerted an influence on a group of Old Russian codices. Our manuscript is thus of importance not only for the study of fourteenth-century Byzantine art, but also for the understanding of Old Russian art. It sheds light on one of the most interesting and complex problems—the activity of Theophanes the Greek in Russia and the sources of his art.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 78. ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 75.

³⁰ M. M. Postnikova-Loseva and T. I. Protas'eva, Licevoe evangelie Uspenskogo sobora kak pamjatnik drevnerusskogo iskusstva pervoj treti XV veka. Drevneruskoe iskusstvo XV-načala XVI vekov (Moscow, 1963), 147.



1. Fol. 7r: Illustration to Oikos 3, the Visitation



2. Fol. 13r: Illustration to *Oikos* 5, the Adoration of the Shepherds

Moscow, State Historical Museum, Synodal Gr. 429, the Akathistos Hymn



3. Fol. 20v: Illustration to Kontakion 8, the Adoration of the Magi

Moscow, State Historical Museum, Synodal Gr. 429, the Akathistos Hymn